

the link

JULY
2013



VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System



12 MUSIC,
FAMILY,
FUN & BENEFITS



July is Disaster Education and Awareness Month, and VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System's Emergency Management Committee has been drilling for life's "what ifs."

Our vision is to provide excellent health care, even when disaster strikes. Not only are we prepared to take care of our own patients, but we actively work with community and national partners in case of large-scale events. Emergency preparedness ensures staff are ready to respond to events ranging from tornados to bombings to extensive flu outbreaks.

Our incident command system may even be activated to help us handle smaller issues within the health care system. In June, we identified bacteria in our water in Grand Island. The incident command system brought together a team that worked seamlessly to ensure the water was safe and a system was installed so we don't encounter the issue again. While not a large-scale emergency, this incident showed our system at work, and it worked well.

Another activity in June was a joint disaster exercise with Offutt Air Force Base and other community partners. Airmen played "mock victims" so we could practice transporting patients across the city and throughout our medical center. An open house (see page 9) showcased our abilities for our staff and Veterans. While we hope we don't need these systems, we keep training and stay prepared. What do you and your family do for emergency preparedness? Do you have a plan?

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FACT: IN 1958, RESEARCHERS WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS INVENTED THE IMPLANTABLE CARDIAC PACEMAKER TO HELP MANY PATIENTS PREVENT POTENTIALLY LIFE-THREATENING COMPLICATIONS FROM IRREGULAR HEARTBEATS.

Cover: A family enjoys the Veterans Freedom Music Festival June 15 in Lincoln, Neb. Photo by Bruce Thiel.

“Being a Vet myself, I just naturally understand that brotherhood. I realize that right now has been a challenging time for a whole new group of individuals. The new Veteran, to me, is a little different than the Veteran of my era. Some of them went into a military situation, and they didn’t know how dynamic it could be. I am a positive person that can speak the same language they do, and also show them my appreciation for their service. I understand what they have been through.”

Ketch Fowler, Assistant Chief,
Veterans Canteen Service | Grand Island
Community-Based Outpatient Clinic



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VA for a Day | Veterans Freedom Music Festival



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This magazine is an authorized publication for VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System (VA NWIHCS). Contents of The Link are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the U.S. government, or the Department of Veterans Affairs. The editorial content of this publication is the responsibility of the VA NWIHCS Public Affairs Office.

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The Link online.



meet

synthia stanosheck

Audiology Technician | Lincoln
Community-Based Outpatient Clinic

**Q: How long you have you
been a VA employee?**

A: "29 years"

**Q: What does
your job entail?**

A: "I do repairs on hearing aids and explain what type of hearing aid is best for each Veteran who is service connected for his or her hearing. I make impressions of their ears. I like that part because Veterans who are getting their hearing aids for the first time are very excited about it."

**Q: What is your favorite thing
about your job?**

A: "The hearing aid program is exactly what it should be. These are the best hearing aids on the market. We are able to give the Veterans the top-of-the-line hearing aid."

**Q: When not at work,
where can you be found?**

A: "I like to garden and I play piano. I have been taking piano lessons for about four years with a friend. I've always wanted to play the piano, and I decided there is no time like now. I love it." 🎹



VETERAN RECEIVES honorary high school diploma

Kate O'Dell | Public Affairs

The familiar graduation tune, "Pomp and Circumstance," played as 79-year-old U.S. Air Force Veteran, Jesus (Jess) Garcia, wheeled down the hall at the Grand Island VA Community Living Center to his graduation party.

Garcia didn't finish high school. Instead, he enlisted in the Air Force during the Korean War. Nearly 60 years later, on May 29, VA employees presented him with an honorary high school diploma.

Garcia has been a resident of the CLC since he suffered a stroke 13 years ago. His wife of 42 years, Sharon, knew he felt he had unfinished business when it came to his education, she said. Along with the employees at the clinic, she kept the presentation of the diploma a surprise for Jess. "It was quite the deal," Sharon said.

Heidi Swenson, LCSW, MSW, has known Jess and his wife for several years. Jess told her he wanted to get his diploma. Swenson worked in a Veterans home prior to coming to the VA, and knew there was a way for Veterans to apply for an honorary diploma. She helped Jess complete an application that was sent to the Nebraska Board of Education for approval. "It was his idea," she said.

As a result of his stroke, Jess doesn't show a lot of emotion, but he was tearful when he was presented with his honorary high school diploma. "It meant quite a bit to me," he said.

"It was such a great celebration and an honor for all of us to do something for Jess. He doesn't ask for much of anything," Swenson said. "It was extremely special." 🎓



Grand Island VA Community Living Center Nurse Manager, Lisa Cantrell, RN, BA, presents resident Jesus (Jess) Garcia with an honorary high school diploma at a surprise celebration held in his honor May 29.

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For more information about how to apply for an honorary high school diploma, visit www.vets.state.ne.us/op_recog.html.

VA RESEARCHER PUBLISHES FINDINGS ON *Rheumatoid Arthritis Medications*

Will Ackerman | Public Affairs

Cheaper combination disease-modifying anti-rheumatic drugs (DMARDs) produced the same clinical benefits as costlier biological treatments in a Department of Veterans Affairs study that compared drug therapy effectiveness for rheumatoid arthritis.

The study's primary author, Dr. James O'Dell, is a rheumatologist at VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System and the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Omaha VA Medical Center's Dr. Ted Mikuls was the study co-author, and Dr. Amy Canella was a primary investigator.

Researchers compared strategies of starting oral, "triple therapy" DMARDs—methotrexate, sulfasalazine and hydroxychloroquine—versus starting one DMARD (methotrexate) plus etanercept in the 48 week study. Etanercept is in a class of injectable drugs known as biologics.

Results were published in the New England Journal of Medicine online June 11 and also appeared in the print edition.

"Before the study, there was a general belief that biologics have significantly more potency, but this study has proven that not to be the case in this patient population," O'Dell said. "The study shows when conventional therapy is used before biologics, there should be a significant cost-savings, not only to patients, but to the health care system."

The study included 353 patients at 16 VA medical centers, 12 rheumatoid arthritis investigational network sites and eight Canadian medical centers, which included the Omaha VA and UNMC. The double-blind study is where neither patients nor their physicians knew which regimen they were receiving.

Patients were divided into two groups: one took the triple-therapy combination; the other took methotrexate and etanercept for 24 weeks. Patients who didn't respond to either therapy switched to the other therapy at 24 weeks for the remainder of the study. Patients in both groups who switched to the other therapy improved, but the response after switching was not significantly different between the two groups.

Veteran Donald Pechacek, 80, a study participant, has had rheumatoid arthritis for years. Although he hadn't taken the triple-therapy pills before, they "worked best for me," he said.



Courtesy Photo

James O'Dell, M.D., is the primary author of the recently published VA rheumatoid arthritis study. He is the chief of rheumatology and immunology at the VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System and the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

“This has improved my quality of life and cut down on the pain. The pill form is also more economical.”

Donald Pechacek | Veteran

Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic disease that causes pain, stiffness, swelling and limitation in the motion and function of multiple joints. In addition to being less-expensive, conventional medications present less-severe side effects than the biologics. 🗣️

This research was supported by the cooperative studies program of the VA's Office of Research and Development, Canadian Institutes for Health Research and National Institute for Health-American Recovery and Reinvestment Act interagency agreements. UNMC public relations contributed to this story.

VIETNAM VETERAN Crafts Gifts FOR FELLOW VETERANS

Kate O'Dell | Public Affairs

George Ellyson served in the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War. When he returned home, he was one of thousands of Veterans who faced adversity from anti-war protestors with a message that was not easily forgotten.

"When we came back from Vietnam, we were baby killers, civilian killers, anything but honorable Vets," he said.

He just recently began talking about his time in service.

Ellyson discovered a meaningful new hobby while he was at the Omaha VA Medical Center being treated for pneumonia. A Voluntary Service volunteer came by with a cart of books. At the bottom of the cart, there were some leather craft kits. As an inpatient, his first craft kit was a checkbook cover his wife now carries.

Ellyson visits Voluntary Service to pick out craft kits to work on when he visits for appointments. He chooses from a variety of leather kits that include checkbook covers, a trifold wallet, chain billfold, moccasins and fanny packs.

"Craft kits help patients who are in the hospital. They are bored with TV. It keeps their hands busy, their minds busy and focused on something."

Hope Wilkinson,
Assistant Chief of Voluntary Service

Ellyson continued the hobby after he was discharged as a way to relax at home and stay focused on something productive and positive. ►



Photo by Bruce Thiel

Voluntary Services provides Veterans with several different types of activities, including leather craft kits, on an activity cart that Volunteers bring to inpatient floors.

"It's therapeutic for me. It gives me something to do when I am just sitting around maybe trying to feel sorry for myself."

George Ellyson | U.S. Navy Veteran

► When Ellyson visits the Omaha hospital, he often walks up to Veterans and gives them one of his finished pieces of work as a gift from a stranger, just to show appreciation. "I just walk up to them and give them something I finished. Sometimes they look at me like I am crazy, like why are you giving me this?" he said.

Ellyson believes in the healing power of being thanked for his service, he said. When he gives his gifts to Veterans, Ellyson knows he is acknowledging their service and showing his appreciation. "I enjoy giving them back to the Veterans because I'm giving back. It is unconditional, a gift we can give with no strings. They don't have to give me anything back." ❶

For more information about Voluntary Service, visit www.nebraska.va.gov/giving.asp, or call 800-451-5796, ext. 3283.

 **Voluntary
Service**
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS



5-Year, \$2.1 million study

TO TEST DIABETES TREATMENT EFFECTIVENESS

University of Nebraska Medical Center
Public Relations

VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System, Omaha, University of Nebraska medical centers and 36 other sites are participating in a nationwide study to compare the long-term benefits and risks of four diabetes drugs in combination with metformin. The project is called the Glycemia Reduction Approaches in Diabetes: A Comparative Effectiveness (GRADE) Study.

The five-year, \$2.1 million study, funded by the National Institutes of Health, aims to enroll about 5,000 patients diagnosed with type 2 diabetes within the last five years who only take metformin. Participants will take metformin and a second medication randomly assigned from among four classes of medications, all approved for use with metformin by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

While short-term studies show the effectiveness of different drugs when used with metformin, there have been no long-term studies of which combination works best and has fewer side effects. When metformin is not enough to help manage type 2 diabetes, physicians may add one of several other drugs to lower blood glucose.

“We know the effectiveness of drugs in lowering the blood glucose levels in the short term, but we don’t know which combinations of medications work the best and how long the combinations work for.”

Dr. Cyrus Desouza,
Endocrinologist | Omaha VA Medical Center and UNMC

“We’ll also evaluate what works better for diverse populations such as in African Americans and Hispanics and how long the drug combinations remain effective in patients,” Desouza said. ►



Courtesy Photo

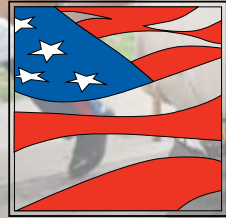
Cyrus Desouza, M.D., is the lead investigator for Glycemia Reduction Approaches in Diabetes: A Comparative Effectiveness (GRADE) study being conducted in part at VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System and the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

► The study will compare the effects of drug combinations on glucose levels, adverse effects, diabetes complications and quality of life over an average of nearly five years.

Study participants will receive diabetes medications for glycemic control. They will make four clinic visits each year, including for laboratory tests for monitoring lipids, A1c and blood pressure. Patients will continue to receive health care through their primary care providers.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 7.1 percent of Nebraskans have been diagnosed with diabetes, primarily due to obesity. Implications of not receiving the most optimal drug can result in complications such as kidney failure, lower-limb amputations and blindness. ⓘ

Learn more about the study at <https://grade.bsc.gwu.edu>. For more information, contact Alissa Alfred in the Omaha VAMC Clinical Research Unit at alissa.alfred@va.gov or 800-451-5796, ext. 4121.



VETERANS FREEDOM MUSIC FESTIVAL

Rain didn't deter music fans June 15 for the Lincoln Veterans Advisory Council's third annual Veterans Freedom Music Festival. Music went from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. and festival-goers camped out on the front lawn of the Lincoln VA to listen.

This year a children's activity area saw plenty of action and drew many families to the festival. New and returning bands entertained at the festival and to a crowd viewing online via live streaming video. Besides the music, online viewers also got to hear interviews throughout the day with Veterans and VA staff about their experiences and services offered through VA.



Photos by Bruce Thiel

Pandemic OPEN HOUSE

Anna Morelock | Public Affairs

More than 300 people went through a conference room at the Omaha VA Medical Center June 4 to learn about dual-use evacuation vehicles, personal respiration systems, bio-seal bags, and hand hygiene. All of these tools and systems were on display to showcase VA Nebraska-Western Iowa Health Care System's emergency preparedness.

“We wanted to let both our staff and our Veterans know what we have supply-wise, and how we're prepared in the event of a natural, pandemic, or man-made disaster.”

Lesley Royal, RN | Infection Prevention Coordinator

Upon reaching the conference room, visitors donned protective gowns to pass through a decontamination system and into the conference room. While the system wasn't running, visitors could see how it would be set up in case of an emergency. A hand-washing station promoted the importance of hand-hygiene, one of the most important tools in fighting pandemic flu. Visitors sealed special bags designed to hold contaminated bodies. Emergency stickers and tags showcased the system in place if the hospital needed to be evacuated. A nurse demonstrated sleds and chairs designed to move patients down steps if elevators were out of use.

With severe weather season in full swing and planning for flu season beginning, the goal of the open house was to ensure Veterans and staff are aware of the systems in place should an emergency occur. The demonstrations allowed Veterans and staff to participate in hands-on emergency scenarios. 📷



Photos by Anna Morelock



Photo by Kate O'Dell

Top: Linda Hargens, RN and infection prevention coordinator, talks to employees about the importance of hand-washing as they enter the open house through a decontamination tent.

Middle: Kris Kintzle uses a thermal imaging scanner to scan a jug of water across the room to compare its temperature to the surrounding area.

Left: Ron Jones, Engineering, tells Dr. Grey Gordon and Dr. Patrick Bacon (right) about the dual-use vehicle, which can transport patients on stretchers, sitting or in wheelchairs.

HELLO

May 5 to June 1

Christina Alkire,

Primary Care and Specialty Medicine

Jonnie Altstadt, Veterans Canteen Service

Scott Hofmann, Surgery

Anne Juarez, Primary Care and Specialty Medicine

Karrie Kiper, Primary Care and Specialty Medicine

Sharon Kochanowicz, Surgery

Gena Kucera, Surgery

Christopher Lathrop, Human Resources

Carlos Lee, Environmental Management Service

Jenae Norton, Quality Management

Emily Pender, Human Resources

Katherine Roshone,

Primary Care and Specialty Medicine

GOODBYE

Kay Boettcher McGann,

Extended Care and Rehab

Holly Brezina, Pharmacy

Wallace Carter, Surgery

Carrie Hansen, Imaging

Michelle Hicks, Surgery

Lavonne Johnson, Extended Care and Rehab

Richard Parsons, Finance

Tessie Rachels, Business Office

Heather Wiegel, Nurse Executive's Office

RETIRING

Roger Randall,

Environmental Management Service

IF YOU COULD VACATION ANYWHERE *where would you go?*

I have to say Australia. I went there when I was 16 with an all-star basketball team for eight days but didn't get a chance to enjoy it. It's a beautiful country, they have great food, and the locals are super nice.

Shantel Webster

Medical Support Assistant | Lincoln CBOC



I would probably go back to Germany. My wife and I were both in the Air Force and that's where we met.

Ed McCloskey, RN, BSN

Operating Room Nurse | Omaha VAMC

I Maui. I love Maui. When I was there last, we took a boat out to a sunken volcano and snorkeled. It's just beautiful and relaxing.

Amy Richards, RN, BSN

Post Anesthesia Care Unit Nurse | Omaha VAMC



I would go to New Zealand to sight see. I grew up on a farm in Dodge City, Kansas. There is a lot of agricultural history in New Zealand. I plan to go with my mom in two years when I finish grad school.

D'Layna Brening, RN

Ambulatory Care Case Manager | Lincoln CBOC

I In the first weeks of July every year, my family and I take vacation in the mountains. We have a cabin at the base of Crestone Peak near Alamosa, Colorado. We hike, drive the jeep, cook, eat and just relax. It is a total unwind.

Dr. Matt Rivard

Acting Associate Chief of Staff for Education | Omaha VAMC



**HAPPY
INDEPENDENCE
DAY**
FUN FACTS

JULY 1776

2.5 million
people
in the U.S.

JULY 2013

316.2 million
people
in the U.S.

59 places in the U.S. contain
the word 'liberty' in their name.

Pennsylvania, with 11, has more of these
places than any
other state. **I ♥ THE USA**

\$38 MILLION In 2012, the dollar
value of U.S. imports
of American flags.
The vast majority of this amount
(\$3.6 million) was for U.S. flags
that were made in China.

\$218.2 MILLION
The value of
fireworks imported
from China in 2012,
representing the bulk of all
U.S. fireworks imported
(\$227.3 million).
U.S. exports of fireworks,
by comparison in 2012,
came to just
\$11.7 million.

**5 Committee Members Drafted
the Declaration of Independence:**

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN ★ ROBERT R. LIVINGSTON
THOMAS JEFFERSON ★ JOHN ADAMS ★ ROGER SHERMAN
*Jefferson, regarded as the strongest and
most eloquent writer, wrote most of the document.*

JULY 4, 1776

the Declaration of Independence was approved by the Continental Congress, setting the 13 colonies on the road to freedom as a sovereign nation. As always, this most American of holidays will be marked by parades, fireworks and backyard barbecues across the country.

56 Signatures are
on the Declaration
of Independence.

2 FUTURE PRESIDENTS

Signed the Declaration of Independence:

John Adams (second President) & Thomas Jefferson (third President)

Both died on the 50th anniversary of signing the declaration (July 4, 1826).

Source: Profile America, U.S. Census, Facts for Features

Employees' Children

EXPERIENCE VA HEALTH CARE FOR A DAY

Kate O'Dell | Public Affairs

More than 37 million boys and girls have participated in one of the nation's largest campaigns, Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day, since its inception more than 20 years ago.

On June 13, 26 children came to the Grand Island Community-Based Outpatient Clinic and found out first-hand what their parents do all day. Cindy Wemhoff, RN, brought her two daughters, Katie, 9, and Addison, 6, for their second year to participate in the program.

"Being a working mom, I think they constantly have questions about what I do," she said. Wemhoff said at the end of the day the girls were both worn out. "When they got home, they plopped on the couch

and said, 'We are tired, now we know why you are tired some days.'"

The day was full of activities and learning opportunities. One of the girls' favorite activities was the scavenger hunt that lasted throughout the day. Addison's group had fun tracking down

miscellaneous items. "We did pretty good, but we couldn't find an American pen, like with an American flag. No one had it."

The children spent time in clinics, including a stop in physical therapy where they were able to learn more about the equipment and processes used to help Veterans recovery from injuries.

"There was a volunteer there who lost his leg and (nurses) showed us all these machines that they use to help him," Katie said.

Katie said she is proud of what her mom does and wants to be a caregiver, too, when she grows up.

"I'd like to be a nurse at the VA, or I'd like to help out at the animal shelter."

For more information about Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day, visit www.daughtersandsonstowork.org.



Photo by Bruce Thiel

Children ages 7 and up visited prosthetics at the Grand Island CBOC during Grand Island's Annual Take Your Kid To Work Day on June 13.

EVENTS what's going on?

- July 1** VA Food Pantry, Lincoln
- July 3** VA Food Pantry, Omaha
- July 4** Fourth of July (federal holiday)
- July 12** EEO Special Emphasis Program Open House, Grand Island
- July 7-13** National Therapeutic Recreation Week
- July 11** Patient-Centered Care Retreat, Omaha
- July 12** VA Human Resources Open House
- July 13-18** National Veterans Wheelchair Games, Tampa, Fla.
- July 16** Patient-Centered Care Retreat, Omaha
- July 17** VA Food Pantry, Omaha
- July 19** VA Coffee House, Lincoln
- July 21** VA Anniversary
- July 24** VA and Community Book Club, Lincoln
- Patient-Centered Care Retreat, Omaha

For more information about VA NWIHCS events, visit www.nebraska.va.gov.



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Register Today!



feds **feed** families

Employees: Donate Today

Federal employees are joining together to collect food nationwide for local food banks.

Bring non-perishable food items and place them into a designated collection bin in your areas.



For more information, contact Kate O'Dell at 402-995-3943 or email katie.odell@va.gov.



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